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The Lived Experience of CrossFit as a Context for the Development of Women's Body Image and Appearance Management Practices

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CrossFit, one of the fastest growing sports in America, is a high-intensity fitness regimen that combines aerobic exercise, gymnastics, and weight training. Analyses of the CrossFit promotional literature suggest that these media sustain hegemonic ideals of femininity while at the same time presenting opportunities for inclusion and for the transgression of traditional gender norms (Knapp, 2015a). Research also suggests that female CrossFit participants experience CrossFit gyms (referred to as “CrossFit boxes”) as spaces that both challenge and reinforce conventional (i.e., heteronormative) notions of masculinity and femininity (Knapp, 2015b). To date, however, researchers have yet to examine how women's participation in CrossFit sets a context for their embodied experiences inside and outside of the CrossFit box. Thus, of interest in the present study was how women's participation in CrossFit gives rise to varied appearance- and body-related feelings and behaviors, bodily aspirations, and experiences relative to cultural norms of hegemonic femininity. Central to these analyses was how the ideology of CrossFit – which sends rather contradictory messages about female appearance and the body – is experienced by women who participate in the sport. Analyses were informed by theory related to feminist cultural studies, which explores the role of gender within culture.

Data were collected via in-depth interviews with 16 women (mean age = 31.8 years) who belong to a CrossFit box and who regularly (at least two times/week) participate in CrossFit. Fifteen participants were Caucasian/White; one identified as Hispanic. Participants had been involved in CrossFit for an average of 2.8 years (range 10 months – 6 years) and engaged in CrossFit work-outs an average of 3.6 times/week (range 2 – 6 times/week). Data were analyzed using constant comparison processes. In many instances, analyses revealed themes of contradiction across and within participants' accounts, including experiences of ambivalence.

Experiences of CrossFit Box Culture. Consistent with prior work, participants experienced the culture the CrossFit as at once undermining and supporting gender hegemony. Although women were encouraged to exhibit traditionally masculine traits such as strength, participants described competition for male attention and pressure to “dress for men” at the box. Interactions with coaches conveyed mixed messages about diet (e.g., follow a specific diet vs. eat what works for you), fitness (fitness as empowering vs. pressure to perform/maintain the body), and appearance (emphasis upon strength vs. emphasis upon hegemonic forms of femininity).

Ideals Aspired to. Participants aspired to three different ideals: (1) a health-focused ideal deemphasizing physical appearance, (2) an athletic ideal emphasizing muscularity and strength, and (3) a culturally-privileged/hegemonic form of femininity.

Bodily Appraisals. When participants appraised their bodies, they (1) expressed comfort with and respect for their bodies/physical capabilities or (2) articulated conflict with their bodies, noting that their bodies violated hegemonic feminine ideals.

Appetites/Diets. Many participants described experiencing a shift in thinking about diets and appetites since becoming involved in CrossFit. Dietary changes attributed to immersion in CrossFit culture included “eating clean” (i.e., avoiding processed foods), experimenting with the exclusion/inclusion of food in the diet, and abandoning the practice of food restriction. Further, participants described different relationships between food and fitness, including: (1) eating (more) to perform and (2) exercising as a means to “earn food” or negate overeating.

Appearance Management. Participation in CrossFit prompted changes in personal grooming and appearance management inside and outside of the box. Changes to personal grooming revolved around gym attendance and functionality. Changes to personal wardrobe were extensive for participants, as they experienced shifts in personal style and a perceived need to learn to re-dress their increasingly “athletic” bodies.

Identity. When asked about identity and presentation of self, participants described confidence and empowerment inside and outside of the box, feeling stronger inside and outside of the box – mentally, emotionally, and physically – and for a few, continued athletic identity outside of the box.

Perceived Influence of CrossFit. Participants shared that CrossFit shifted their perceptions of fitness and health, the ideal female body, and gender. Most notable was participants’ change in how they regarded the ideal female body, as participants described a movement away from the culturally-privileged, hegemonic female ideal toward a belief that muscles are beautiful and the notion that women should accept themselves “as they are.” At the same time, however, even participants who appreciated the strength and muscularity they had gained from CrossFit at times expressed that, owing to their muscularity, it was difficult to find women’s clothes that fit, questioned the sustainability of maintaining a “CrossFit body”/lifestyle, and noted that they did not have energy for other activities in their lives. Some indicated that they were drawn to physical activities that emphasized slenderness, such as yoga, and noted that participation in CrossFit was so consuming it was causing them to “lose a sense of the self.”

Thus, findings suggest that women’s CrossFit participation may set a context for diverse embodied experiences within and beyond the CrossFit box, perhaps owing to the somewhat contradictory cultural ideology of the sport. For some women, participation may support experiences of empowerment, including a disposition to transgress hegemonic norms of femininity in terms of the ideals to which they aspire, how they eat, their identities, their views on health and fitness, and their perceptions of gender. For others, however, participation in CrossFit may be experienced as constraining – even underscoring traditional gender norm expectations – or may produce feelings of ambivalence. Variables that explained some differences in experience included participants’ body histories and ages.

Knapp, B. A. (2015a). Gender representation in the *CrossFit Journal*: A content analysis. *Sport in Society*, 18(6), 688-703.

Knapp, B. A. (2015b). Rx’d and shirtless: An examination of gender in a CrossFit box. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity*, 23(1), 42-53.